

Ironical Symbols in Saki's Stories

Senem Üstün Kaya

Department of ELT, Başkent University, Ankara, Turkey

Abstract— *H. H. Munro (1870-1916) is one of the most outstanding English writers who wrote with a pseudonym of Saki, impressed by Omar Khayyam. As a distinguished writer of the Edwardian period, Saki applied certain stylistic peculiarities in his works. Many of his stories include twisting endings, blend of humorous situations with tragic events, shocking characters, violent acts, animal imagery, satire, cruelty and ironical symbols that hinder Saki's messages as a writer. This study aims at analyzing Munro's three famous short stories, 'The Open Window', 'Sredni Vashtar' and 'The Story-Teller', to conclude that symbols are ironically used to shock the reader while presenting the messages of the writer.*

Keywords— *imagery, ironical symbols, stylistic peculiarities, twisting endings.*

I. INTRODUCTION

H H. Munro (1870-1916) was an outstanding British writer, playwright and journalist who satirized the mores of Edwardian society. He was born in Akyab, Burma. His father was an Inspector General for the Indian Imperial Police in Burma and his mother died after being traumatized by a cow. After this tragedy, he was sent to England with his siblings to be raised by his grandmother and two strict aunts in a puritanical household. Many of his stories are based on the tyranny of the adults over young ones, the satires of his sorrowful childhood and the boundaries of human nature. When Saki was twenty-three, he became a member of military forces in Burma, where he was fascinated with the wild animals. He returned to England after he contracted malaria and in London, he pursued his literary career by publishing his first book about the Russian Empire. In 1900, he adopted the pseudonym, Saki, impressed by one of the works of Omar Khayyam. From 1909 to 1914, he wrote short stories until he joined the army during World War I at the age of 43. He was killed in 1916 in the Battle of Ancre by a German sniper. Born in Burma, a colony of the Empire, Saki criticizes the oppressive and destructive power of the upper-class imperialists over the oppressed colonized people of his time. He was a great satirist who focused on the hypocrisy and pretensions of the Edwardian society in a witty way. Saki's stories contain a rich variety of stylistic peculiarities: characters' playing tricks on each other, stories ending with surprising twists, sparkling

wit, humorous situations resolving in tragic events, cruelty and chilling portrait of mankind, violence, satire, the supernatural forces, the macabre, unconventional subjects, irony, the blend of sharp humor and shocking horror. What appeals the readers is Munro's style in his short stories: his neutral, apparently indifferent and unemotional style in which he uses whimsical plots and a cynical tone (Nedelcut, 2008, p. 104). Almost all his stories involve clever lines and twist endings, which underlie a clue about his messages based on the darker side of human nature and the changing world. Like a story teller, Saki tells us his stories to transmit his own experiences and feelings. Reacting against the clichés and standards of his society, for Saki, life is full of twists and surprising consequences. As is seen in many of his short fiction, Saki prefers to communicate implicitly with his readers via symbols and motives which are carefully built within the flow of the action. However, what surprises the reader is that Saki uses the symbols ironically with a twisting turn throughout the end of the stories to create an astonishing impact. Therefore, in this study, the focus is on the symbols used ironically to represent Saki's messages.

II. IRONICAL SYMBOLS IN THE STORIES

'The Open Window', a story-within-a-story, takes place in the early 1900s at an English country house set on an estate hunting grounds. The story is about a deception displayed by a girl, Vera, at a naive and ill man, Mr Nuttel. Suffering from an 'absence of mental excitement' (Munro, p. 296), Mr Nuttel has come to Mrs Sappleton's house to find peace; however, his condition got worse as he rushed out. After realizing that Mr Nuttel knows a little about her aunt, Vera tells a story of the open window. Vera tells Mr Nuttel that Mrs Sappleton has been in disillusionment and depression after the loss of her husband and brothers who never came back from shooting. She explains that Mrs Sappleton leaves the window open so that her husband and brothers might come one day. Mrs Sappleton's comment on the open window justifies Vera:

I hope you don't mind the open window...my husband and brothers will be home directly from shooting, and they always come in this way. They've been out for snipe in the marshes today, so they'll make a fine mess over my poor

carpets. So like you menfolk, isn't it? (Munro, p. 296).

In the meantime, Mr Nuttel sees three men walking towards the window. While he rushes out of the house with fear, Vera makes up another story about Mr Nuttel because 'Romance at short notice was her [Vera's] speciality' (Munro, p. 297).

In the story, for the readers, the 'open window' first symbolizes Mrs Sappleton's heartbreak and anguish at the loss of her husband and younger brothers. When the truth is revealed, the open window symbolizes the deceit both for the readers and Mr Nuttel. Saki uses the symbol 'open window' ironically by using an object as both sorrow and deceit. Like Mr Nuttel, the reader follows Vera's story with sympathy and sorrow. When the truth is revealed at the end, the feeling of sympathy is replaced with anger. This twisting ending underlies Saki's messages: nothing is as it seems in life and people can easily deceive others without considering the consequences.

Similarly, the reader is shocked with the next twisted ending story of Saki: 'Sredni Vashtar' (1911), a revenge story of a ten-year-old boy, Conradin who must live with his tyrannical oppressive 'cousin and guardian' (Munro, p. 159), Mrs de Ropp. As stated at the beginning of the story, Conradin has a few years to live due to his illness. For an unknown reason, Conradin hates his cousin but masks it easily. Like Saki's aunt Augusta (Waugh, 1986, p. viii), Mrs de Ropp is a very strict woman who forbids everything to the child 'for his good'.

Conradin's only happiness is his pets in the tool shed of his cousin's house: a ferocious polecat-ferret that Conradin purchases from the butcher's son and a hen. The only reason of his happiness is the animals and his imagination in his limited life:

Without his imagination, which was rampant under the spur of loneliness, he would have succumbed long ago. [...] Such few pleasures as he could contrive for himself gained an added relish from the likelihood that they would be displeasing to his guardian, and from the realm of his imagination she was locked out – an unclean thing, which should find no entrance (Munro, p. 159).

The readers feel sympathy for Conradin, who is deprived of love and affection and finds real love with the Houdan hen and the polecat-ferret, Sredni Vashtar. Hen is the symbol of innocence of the child and the ferret is the evil side of Conradin.

Like Saki, Conradin is trapped in the house with a guardian and creates a world for himself in which he

turns the polecat into a pagan god. The hen and the ferret have become his family and only friends. Although Conradin 'was dreadfully afraid of the lithe, sharp-fanged beast' (Munro, p. 160), it became his most valuable possession because its presence in the shed was a secret and happiness for the boy. Conradin has a purpose in his boring life, he postpones his hatred to his guardian and can cope with the life he leads in that terrible house. The 'tool shed' in the garden has turned out to be a 'haven' for the young boy:

In a forgotten corner, however, almost hidden behind a dismal shrubbery, was a disused tool-shed of respectable proportions, and within its walls Conradin found a haven, something that took on the varying aspects of a playroom and a cathedral (Munro, p. 159-60).

When Mrs de Ropp sells his hen, Conradin feels an extreme hatred towards Mrs. DeRopp and prays his god to help him for revenge: 'Do one thing for me Sredni' (Munro, p. 161). In ritualistic manners, he worships his god with mystic ceremonies and praises it with a short poem:

Sredni Vashtar went forth, His thoughts were red thoughts and his teeth were white. His enemies called for peace, but he brought them death. Sredni Vashtar the Beautiful (Munro, p. 162).

In the story, the clash between nature and society is foregrounded through the characters of Conradin and Mrs de Ropp. Conradin represents nature (oppressed) and Mrs de Ropp is the society (oppressor). Their battle displays Munro's message: people can have cruel intentions to escape from oppression. Conradin does not possess malice, rather, he just wants to break free. Saki portrays the aunt in this story to criticize the hypocrisies and pretensions of adults who become oppressors for the younger ones as Auberon Waugh (1986) mentions: '[t]he boy in [...] [the] story is dying [...] and we are given to understand that he is dying because his imaginative life is being stifled by the pestering boredom and domination of his terrible female guardian' (p. viii).

In 'Sredni Vashtar', 'toast' is ironically a twisting symbol. It involves two meanings: piece(s) of bread with butter on it and a sign of cheers. At the beginning of the story, the first meaning is used but with a deeper analysis throughout the end, it becomes a sign of cheers for Conradin who celebrates his victory. By forbidding the toast for 'his [Conradin's] good' (Munro, p. 159), Mrs de Ropp tyrannically rules over Conradin. After the loss of the hen, the cousin prepares a toast for the afternoon tea to comfort the boy. Throughout the end of the story, after the ferret kills Mrs de Ropp in the shed, Conradin 'fished a toasting-fork out of the sideboard drawer and proceeded

to toast himself a piece of bread' (Munro, p. 163) and he eats with great pleasure. He, in a sense, celebrates his victory with the forbidden toast and 'drinks in honor' of the death of his tyrannical cousin.

In 'Sredni Vashtar', Saki implicitly depicts his message of the clash between the hypocritical approach of adults against the sincerity and directness of children. Mrs de Ropp's hypocrisy is underlined when she sells the hen for Conradin's 'good' again. Conradin is rewarded and the cousin is punished when the ferret-cat leaves the shed with 'dark wet stains around the fur of jaws and throat' (Munro, p. 163).

In this study, the last story of Saki is 'The Story-Teller' (1913), a story-within-a-story. In a hot railway carriage, an aunt is telling a story to her two nieces and a nephew. Like many Saki's stories, as reminiscent of his childhood experiences, the aunt in the story is very strict and her remarks begin with 'Don't' and nearly all of the children's remarks begin with 'Why?' (Munro, p. 397). Annoyed and bored with the story, a bachelor decides to tell an 'improper' (Munro, p. 402) story to entertain the children. When compared with 'the stupidest story' (Munro, p. 398) of the aunt, the bachelor's story delights the children due to its ending because 'unlike most Saki's stories, [he] knows the nature and desires of children very well' (Köklü, 2006, p. 51). The bachelor is not hypocritical in that sense.

In the story, 'a horribly good' (Munro, p. 399) girl boasts with her medals for goodness, which bring her the honor of walking in the Prince's garden. Wearing her three medals, Bertha proudly walks in the garden till a wolf appears for his meal. Hiding herself in the bushes, she thought to herself 'If I had not been so extraordinarily good I should have been safe in the town at this moment' (Munro, p. 401). Trembling with fright, her three medals clink together and the wolf finds and eats her in the hiding place. The story is a perfect sample of Saki's style with irony, twisting ending and satire. Unlike many of the traditional stories in which animals are the enemy of the humans, in Saki's story, at the end a human being is punished by an animal. For Köklü (2006) 'Saki presents the discrepancy between the hypocrisy of the adult world and the sincerity of childhood' (p. 53).

What shocks the reader is the message presented in the story of the bachelor: goodness might bring disaster; virtue and being good can attract misfortune and good is not always rewarded. Unlike the usual and accepted teachings of 'Good is rewarded and bad is punished', in this story, Bertha's medals, signs of her extreme 'goodness', cause her tragedy. Bertha's three medals ironically symbolize a destruction rather than a reward. The main aim of Saki in this story is to criticize the

stereotypical behaviors and pretensions of oppressive adults.

III. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, a good story is the one that surprises the reader. In a talented way, Saki constructed his stories on suspense, surprise and shocks. It would be proper to indicate that his main aim is to tell us a story in which 'the good is not always rewarded' and human nature can be astonishingly violent. Being witty like Vera ('The Open Window'), revengeful like Conradin ('Sredni Vashtar') or direct like the bachelor ('The Story-Teller') is more natural than being hypocritical and insensitive. Vera deceives Mr Nuttel for entertainment, Conradin causes the death of his own relative for revenge and the bachelor tells a horrible improper story to the children for delight. In all these three stories, Saki presents his messages through ironical symbols. The 'open window' which represents the sorrow of a woman at the beginning of the story turns out to be a deceitful story of a young lady; the 'toast' that represents the victory of a despot cousin becomes the sign of victory of a malice boy and the 'medals' of a horribly good girl becomes her punishment rather than reward. By rejecting common public perceptions and clichés told in stories for ages, Munro portrays the deeper side of human nature and the changing world in Edwardian society. Through his stories, the writer gives his messages that adults, mirrors of the whole society, are rigid and oppressive; good is not always rewarded in real life and what appears to be accepted by society might be deceitful.

As a satirist, Munro criticizes the hypocrisy, pretensions and oppressive power of the upper-class Edwardian imperialists over the colonized people of his age. To achieve an explicit effect, he prefers ironical symbols that lead to twisting endings. In a sense, Saki makes fun of the hypocrite abusers who show-off to others by punishing them at the end of stories. Mrs de Ropp dies in 'Sredni Vashtar', the aunt in 'The Story-Teller' is ridiculed and Mr Nuttel becomes more insane in 'The Open Window'.

REFERENCES

- [1] Köklü, E. (2006). 'Representation of Aggression in Child and Adolescent Protagonists in the Short Stories of Saki (Hector Hugh Munro)'. MA Thesis. Hacettepe University, Print.
- [2] Munro, H.H. (1930). *The Short Stories of Saki*. Complete with an Introduction by Christopher Morley. Great Britain: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd. Retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.182475>
- [3] Nedelcut, A. (2008). Saki's Fantastic Creatures in 'Tobermory', 'Sredni Vashtar' and 'Gabriel-Ernest'.

Language and Literature European Landmarks of Identity. (Ed). Corina-Amelia Georgescu. Vol. 2. Pitesti UP, pp. 104-7. Web 3 May 2014.

- [4] Waugh, A. (1986). Introduction. Saki (H. H. Munro). *The Chronicles of Clovis (1911)*. New York. Penguin, pp. vii-xii. Print.